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Textual Triads: The Identification and Justification of an Apocalyptic Literary Form

Abstract

This study seeks to elucidate just one of the many literary/structural devices found in John's Apocalypse—textual triads (groupings of three words or ideas that are either repeated or parallel to each other). In so doing, this paper will argue that not only do textual triads exist in Revelation, but they are present in various forms throughout this last canonical work and can be categorized/justified via grammatical/literary markers that help readers identify them within the text of Scripture. All this will prove that, among many other literary devices, the apostle utilizes this unique threefold repetition in pervasive ways to describe, reveal, and explain a wide variety of people, places, things, and ideas in his apocalyptic presentation. What will be yielded in this study ought to help future students more fully appreciate the compelling message and final climactic contribution of God's grand metanarrative—a contribution that while containing chaos, confusion, and cosmic catastrophe, is underpinned by a sophisticated and divinely-ordered literary structure that grounds what is revealed in a compelling, organized, and beautiful way.

Keywords

Revelation, Grammar, Literature, Repetition, Three

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The Book of Revelation is not only the latest of the Scripture's major apocalyptic writings, it is one of the most, if not the most, intricate and sophisticated.[1] Its beautiful complexity is not only witnessed in the content of the book, but in its literary form. This study seeks to elucidate just one of the many literary/structural devices found in John's Apocalypse—textual triads (groupings of three words or ideas that are either repeated or parallel to each other). In so doing, this paper will argue that not only do textual triads exist in Revelation, but they are present in various forms throughout this last canonical work and can be categorized/justified via grammatical/literary markers that help readers identify them within the text of Scripture. All this will prove that, among many other literary devices, the apostle utilizes this unique threefold repetition in pervasive ways to describe, reveal, and explain a wide variety of people, places, things, and ideas in his apocalyptic presentation.

The Triads Identified

What Are Textual Triads?

For the purpose of this work, a textual "triad" will include any grouping of three related phrases, words, ideas, and/or other phenomena that are grammatically, literarily, and/or thematically connected in the text of Revelation.[2] One more obvious example of such a triad is found in Revelation 4:8 with the thrice-repeated "holy" ("ἅγιος") found in the exclamation of the four living creatures in the throne room—"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty."[3] While theologically charged words repeated one right after the other are easy to recognize, in other cases, triads can involve the simple repetition of a definite article. For example, in Revelation 1:4 the invocation of God as the one "who is and who was and who is to come" includes three occurrences of "ὁ" that are used substantively to indicate the shared subject of these differing verbs.[4] Though, as in these examples, the strict duplication of a single word is simple to detect, other instances of triads use the same root word in different forms (such as singular or plural) as in 12:14 with "time and times, and half a time" ("καιρὸν καὶ καιροὺς

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[1] Stephen L. Cook, *The Apocalyptic Literature* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2008), 192. Cook goes on to say that "(Revelation's) sophistication, indeed, makes it one of the greatest literary and theological writings among the Scriptures."

[2] Leeland Ryken defines triads as "any literary situation in which events occur in threes or in which the material is arranged in a pattern of three." Leeland Ryken, "Threefold Repetition" in *A Complete Handbook of Literary Forms in the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 198-99.

[3] All Scriptural quotes are taken from the NASB 1995 unless indicated otherwise.

[4] This same construction is utilized in Rev 1:8 and 4:8 see also 17:8.

καὶ ἥμισυ καιροῦ”).[5] Still others involve both noun and verbal forms of the same root as in 13:5-6 with “blasphemies” and “blaspheme” (“βλασφημίας” and “βλασφημῆσαι” respectively).[6]

Triads do not always use exact repetition. Instead, some connect three distinct, yet related ideas that are portrayed in the text and connected in different ways. For example, in Revelation 1:2, John identifies himself as the one who testified to three different things: “to the Word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.” In 2:2 Jesus is said to know three things about the church of Ephesus: “I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance.” “Glory and honor and thanks” are ascribed to him who sits on the throne in 4:9. No wind is said to blow “on the earth or on the sea or on any tree” in 7:1.[7] There are three elements of a storm theophany identified in 8:5—"peals of thunder and sounds and flashes of lightning and an earthquake.” Mankind is said to perish under three implications of the first three trumpets—“the fire and smoke and brimstone.”[8] John is commanded to measure “the temple of God and the altar and those who worship in it” in 11:1. Three plagues of “pestilence and mourning and famine” are listed in 18:8. Three categories of God’s people are counted in 18:20—“saints and apostles and prophets.” Three ways of identifying the people of the world[9] and the authorities over them[10] are employed in 19:18 and 19 respectively. Satan is described by three titles in 20:2—“the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan.”[11] Heaven is said to be void of any “mourning or crying or pain”[12] and its “city and its gates and its wall”[13] will be measured. In each of these cases, three individual components are used to name, describe, or explain a single entity without the use of repetition.

Still other types of triads abound. The oft-repeated “Lord God, the Almighty,”[14] where each label—"Lord,” “God,” and “Almighty”—becomes one important component of a three-fold title, is one example. In other cases, similar and related actions that are three in number are present. The indictment lodged against the Jezebel woman in Revelation 2:20 is one example—"...who *calls*

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[5] Rev 12:14.

[6] See also repetition of different form of “δίδωμι” in 13:2.

[7] See the repetition of these same elements in 7:3.

[8] Rev 9:17 & 18.

[9] “free men and slaves and small and great.” In this example “small and great” comprise the third conceptual element of this triad together as they are adjoined by their own kai.

[10] “the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies assembled”

[11] The Granville Sharp rule applied to this example places both “the devil” and “Satan” under the governance of the same definite article indicating that these final two titles are one element and this element of the triad.

[12] Rev 21:4.

[13] Rev 21;15.

[14] Rev 4:8, 11:14, 15:3, 16:7, 19:6, 21:22.

herself a prophetess, and she *teaches* and *leads* My bond-servants astray. . .” (emphasis added). In this example “calls” (“λέγουσα”), “teaches” (“διδάσκει”), and “leads” (“πλανᾷ”) are all present verbs used to highlight the same woman’s program of deception in the church of Thyatira.[15] Another example of this type of triad is found in 8:8-9 when John reports “and a third of the sea *became* blood, and a third of the creatures which were in the sea and had life, *died*; and a third of the ships *were destroyed*” (emphasis added). Here “became” (“ἐγένετο”), “died” (“ἀπέθανεν”), and “were destroyed” (“διεφθάρησαν”) are all completed actions that function in similar ways to describe the definitive results of the second trumpet judgment.[16]

While the examples mentioned thus far deal with individual words and/or titles, other triads involve entire phrases. In John’s report on the beast from the earth he writes, “And he causes all, the small and the great, and the rich and the poor, and the free men and the slaves, to be given on their right hand or on their forehead.”[17] In this example, three parallel phrases exist in apposition to “all” in the following three-fold pattern:

1) “the small and the great”
2) “the rich and the poor”
3) “the free men and the slaves”

One might say that the individual elements of this triad illustrate three ways to say “all.” It is almost as though John decides to describe the total population by means of both their standing, class, and degree of liberty. In John’s lengthy description of the throne space in 4:4-6 he writes:

> “Out from the throne come flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder. And there were seven lamps of fire burned before the throne which are the seven Spirits of God and before the throne there was

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[15] See repetition of future tense in 2:23 with “I *will kill* her children with pestilence and all the churches *will know* that I am he who searches the minds and hearts and I *will give* to each one of you according to your deeds” (emphasis added). In this verse both “ἀποκτενῶ,” “γνώσονται,” and “δώσω,” are all future tense verbs related to the judgment against the woman indicted in verse 20.

[16] For more examples of these see “see nor hear nor walk” (βλέπειν δύνανται οὔτε ἀκούειν οὔτε περιπατεῖν) involving three present active infinitives in 9:20; “ will make war with them and overcome them and kill them” (ποιήσει μετ᾽ αὐτῶν πόλεμον καὶ νικήσει αὐτοὺς καὶ ἀποκτενεῖ αὐτούς) which utilizes three future active indicative verbs to predict a future event. See also 1:3; 2:20, 23; 4:10, 11; 6:1-2; 7:17; 11:7, 11; 14:19; 16:10-11; 18:3; 19:7; and 20:3 for similar examples of triads involving identical verb tenses and/or moods.

[17] Rev 13:6.

> something like a sea of glass, like crystal; and in the center and around the throne, four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind. . .”

In this passage three phenomena are shown emanating from or around the throne in some way—each introduced by their own preposition and highlighted by the repetition of “the throne” (τοῦ θρόνου).

> 1) “Out from the throne come flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder. And there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God);
> 2) and before the throne there was something like a sea of glass, like crystal;
> 3) and in the center and around the throne, four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind”[18]

While most components of the triads identified thus far have occurred in close proximity to each other (within a single clause or in connected/successive series of clauses), other examples of triads involve much larger units of text with the distance between each component spanning much larger contexts. For instance, in Revelation 19, the protagonist of the Apocalypse is referred to by means of three different titles: “Faithful and True” in verse 11, “The Word of God” in verse 13, and “King of Kings, and Lord of Lords” in verse 16.[19] Further apart still are the three praise stanzas of chapters 4 and 5 that are each introduced with the same exclamatory “Worthy” (Ἄξιος”.[20] Even broader still, one might also observe the program of judgments lodged against the world in the book existing in three phases—seals (6:1-8:2), trumpets (8:6-11:19), and bowls (16:1-

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[18] For more examples of this type of triad see 5:1 and the three things that John sees that lead to the tension of the passage, 6:4 with the three capacities of the red horseman, 9:8-10 with the three descriptive clauses that characterize the demonic horde out of the abyss, 11:19 with the three activities taking place in heaven, 14:9-10 with the three logically connected realities concerning the worship of the beast and things associated therewith, 18:3 with the three behaviors of the world in relation to the harlot, 19:!5 with the three descriptions of Christ’s judgment of the earth, 19:20-21 with three fates of three different enemies of God, 20:4 with the three activities of the redeemed, and 21:5-8 with the three statements of God.

[19] For an example of another triad spanning a similar distance see 14:6, 8, and 9’s repetition of “another angel” (ἄλλος ἄγγελος).

[20] 4:11, “Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created”; 5:9, “Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood *men* from every tribe and tongue and people and nation”; and 5:12, “…Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.” For another example of a triad like this see Revelation 22:7, 12, and 20’s three-fold use of “I am coming quickly” (“ἔρχομαι ταχύ”).

21). To be sure, the triads that are present in Revelation come in all shapes and sizes.

In addition to various shapes and sizes are varying degrees of complexity. Most of the triads mentioned above have proven straightforward with each element/component of the triad naturally following the others. That said, some triads can be imbedded inside others, creating what might be called a compound triad. Revelation 1:4-5 illustrates one example:

> "John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was) and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth."

In this series of phrases there is a triad highlighting each member of the Trinity "from" which the "grace" and "peace" is coming to the intended audience as follows:

> 1) "from Him who is and who was and who is to come
> 2) and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne
> 3) and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth"

However, upon closer inspection, one also notices that imbedded within the first and third element of the triad above is another smaller triad used to describe the first and second member of the Trinity respectively—"From Him 1) who is and 2) who was and 3) who is to come" and "Jesus Christ, 1) the faithful witness, 2) the firstborn of the dead, 3) and the ruler of the kings of the earth." Sometimes, a triad may serve as one element of a larger triad as in the case found in Revelation 1:8,

> 1) "I am the Alpha and the Omega says the Lord God,
> 2) who is and who was and who is to come
> 3) the Almighty"

In this example, the threefold "who is and who was and who is to come" first introduced in 1:4 is given as one of the three descriptions of the "Lord God" offered in verse 8 of the same chapter.

Even more complex triads include those that involve overlapping elements in which one or more elements of one prove to be elemental of another. Revelation 22:17 serves as an excellent case: "the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who hears say, "Come.' And let the one who is thirsty

come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost." In this example you have one triad involving three uses of the verb "come" ("ἔρχομαι").

1) "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.'
2) And let the one who hears say, 'Come.'
3) and let the one who is thirsty come"

However, there is also three participles behaving as permissive imperatives.[21]

1) "let the one who hears (ὁ ἀκούων) say, 'Come.'
2) And let the one who is thirsty (ὁ διψῶν) come;
3) let the one who wishes (ὁ θέλων) take the water of life without cost."

In this case, the first two elements of the latter triad prove to also be the anterior elements of the former triad.

Groupings of three related phrases, words, and/or other phenomena that are grammatically, literarily, and/or thematically connected/related prove both copious and various in the text of Revelation. Not only do these vary in size and scale, but they also exist in different degrees of complexity. That said, prior to reaching any conclusions concerning how these triads are behaving and what they are accomplishing, this study would do well to justify exactly what is included in this compendium of idiosyncratic literary threes.

How are they Justified?

Though what has already been presented might, in and of itself, argue that these triads are numerous and differentiating, highlighting the textual indicators that justify these phenomena will demonstrate that these triads are not being read into the text. The means by which this study has justified, scored, and classified the triads observed in the text of Revelation will be explained here. In so doing, the reader can trust that this argument is not indicative of some fanatical numerological pursuit for hidden meanings as much as it is, among other things, a carefully measured investigation of one element of the literary structure of this important canonical work.

This study endorses a grading scale from one to three with one identifying a triad that suffers no textual indicator, two identifying a triad that has one clear textual indicator, and three identifying a triad that has at least two textual indicators. Textual indicators include the following:

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[21] In this case the articular participle is functioning as an independent verbal participle, particularly with imperative force. Of the possible imperative functions, the one that best fits the context is what Wallace refers to as a "permissive" imperative. For justification on this choice see Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 488, 650.

1) repetition of words
2) repetition of conjunctions
3) repetition of prepositions
4) repetition of definite article
5) repetition of verb type
6) repetition of verb tense
7) repetition of verb mood
8) parallel clause structure
9) thematic parallelism
10) carinal numbers

Thrice repeated words are perhaps the easiest to observe in the text. This might include single words that are repeated as in Revelation 4:11, 5:9, and 5:12's use of "worthy" (αξιος)[22] or involve the repetition of entire phrases as in the case of 10:6 and its repeated use of "and the things in it" (καὶ τὰ ἐν αὐτῇ).[23]

The greatest number of observed triads in Revelation include the repetition of conjunctions. Most of these involve the use of the conjunction "and" (καὶ) in the following pattern: X "and" Y "and" Z. In this structure two conjunctions (in this case "καὶ") separate three distinct elements of a single triad. Some of these include the joining of three words as in 18:20's "saints and (καὶ) apostles and (καὶ) prophets"[24] or entire clauses joined by multiple conjunctions as in 18:3,

1) "For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the passion of her immorality
2) *and* the kings of the earth have committed acts of immorality with her
3) *and* the merchants of the earth have become rich by the wealth of her sensuality" (emphasis added).[25]

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[22] See also the repetition of "holy" (ἅγιος) in 4:8. See also "the things" (via the plural neuter pronoun form of ὅς) in 1:19; "was burned up" (κατακαίω) in 8:7; "a third" (τὸ τρίτον) in 8:8-9, 8:12; "woe" (οὐαί) in 8:13; "number" (ἀριθμὸς) in 13:18; "like the sound" (ὡς φωνὴν) in 14:2; "these" (οὗτοί) in 14:4; "like" (ὡς) in 19:6; "said to me" ("λέγει μοι") in 19:9-10; "said" ("εἶπεν") in 21:5-8; "seven" ("ἑπτὰ") in 21:9; "twelve" ("δώδεκα") in 21:12 and 21:14; and "come" ("Ἔρχου") in 22:17.

[23] See also "if anyone" ("Εἴ τις") in 13:9-10; "the image of the beast" ("τῇ εἰκόνι τοῦ θηρίου") in 13:15; "another angel" ("ἄλλος ἄγγελος") in 14:6, 8, 9 and in 14:15, 17, 18; "out of the mouth" ("ἐκ τοῦ στόματος") in 16:13; "I am coming quickly" ("ἔρχομαι ταχύ") in 22:7, 12, 20;

[24] For other examples see 1:4, 8, 9; 4:8, 9, 11; 8:5; 9:18, 20; 11:1; 12:10, 14; 17:8; 18:8; 19:1, 7, 18, 19; 20:4; 21:15, 16.

[25] For other examples see 1:3, 5-6, 7, 17-18, 19; 2:2-3, 5, 9, 13, 20, 23; 3:5, 18, 20; 4:5-6, 10; 5:1, 13-14; 6:4, 6, 8; 7:14, 15, 17; 8:5, 7, 8-9, 12; 9:7, 8-10, 17; 10:6; 11:6, 7, 10, 11, 19; 12:1,

That said, καὶ is not the only conjunction used to create a triad in Revelation. In 13:15 it reads, "And it was given to him to give breath to the image of the beast, *so that* the image of the beast would even speak *and* cause as many as do not worship the image of the beast to be killed" (emphasis added). In this verse "so that" (ἵνα) and "and" (καὶ) introduce the second and third element of the triad respectively. Though these conjunctions are different, they are each moving the thought along by introducing the next element of a three-fold idea. Something similar happens in 13:18 when it says, in part, "…Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast *for* the number is that of a man; *and* his number is six hundred and sixty-six." (emphasis added). In this example "for" (γὰρ) and "and" (καὶ) introduce elements of a triad that each involve "the number" discussed in the context of Revelation 13.[26] The combination of the conjunction and the repeated use of "number" (two textual indicators) grant this example a score of 3 per this study's scale.

Prepositions also serve as textual indicators of triads in the Book of Revelation. In 1:4-5 the preposition "from" (ἀπὸ) introduces three sources of the blessing voiced,

> "Grace to you and peace,
> 1) *from* Him who is and who was and who is to come,
> 2) *and from* the seven Spirits who are before His throne,
> 3) *and from* Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood" (emphasis added)

In this example, "ἀπὸ" is used in combination with "καὶ" (a repeated preposition along with a repeated conjunction), awarding this triad with two textual indicators a score of three.[27] Consider the example introduced earlier in Revelation 4:5-6. In this case, three different prepositions, each demonstrating location, are used to help indicate a textual triad.

> 1) "*Out from* the *throne* come flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder. And there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God

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3; 13:1, 2, 16; 14:2, 19; 16:9, 10-11, 13, 18; 17:11; 18:2; 19:6, 15, 20-21; 20:3, 5-8; 21:12; 22:3, 17.

[26] For other examples of conjunctions used in this way see 7:1 and 3 with the repetition of the correlating conjunction "or" ("μήτε").

[27] See the repetition of the preposition "ἐπὶ" ("on") in 7:1 for another example.

2) *and before the throne* there was something like a sea of glass, like crystal;
3) *and in the center and around* the *throne*, four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind" (emphasis and format added)

Introducing each element of this triad is a prepositional phrase[28] used to highlight three things in proximity to or emanating from the throne. The use of three prepositional phrases along with the repetition of "throne" (θρόνου) and the repeated use of the conjunction "and" (καὶ) means that this triad possesses three justifying indicators, awarding it an especially worthy score of three per this study's grading scale.

A more subtle textual indicator of a triad is found in the use of the definite article. In Revelation 7:3, rather than say "Do not harm the earth or sea or trees," an angel exclaims in a loud voice, "do not harm *the* earth or *the* sea or *the* trees"[29] (emphasis added).[30] In his repeated use of the accusative definite article, it appears as though the speaker is highlighting three things/domains that the four angels standing at the four corners of the earth were not permitted to damage. Taken along with the repetition of "or" (μήτε) this example also receives a score of three given that it contains two textual indicators. Sometimes definite articles introduce individual nouns; other times they introduce entire phrases as in 13:16,

"and he causes all,
1) *the* small and the great
2) *and the* rich and the poor
3) *and the* free men and the slaves" (emphasis added).

In this example, three indicators are present: the repetition of definite articles, the adjoining conjunctions ("καὶ") and the parallel structure that will be discussed later. Such grants this triad (with at least two textual indicators) a score of three.

That said, other triads involve three things that are governed/supervised by a single definite article. Revelation 1:9 reads "I John, your brother and fellow partaker in *the* tribulation and kingdom and perseverance…" (emphasis added). Here, John establishes his role as a sympathetic author (that is sympathetic to the present and future conditions that many in his audience are experiencing and will

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[28] "ἐκ" ("out of"), "ἐνώπιον" ("before"), and "ἐν μέσῳ" ("in the center") respectively.

[29] "τὴν γῆν μήτε τὴν θάλασσαν μήτε τὰ δένδρα"

[30] For other examples see 1:5 ("*the* faithful witness, *the* firstborn of the dead, *the* ruler of the kings of the earth"); 3:14 ("*the* Amen, *the* faithful and true Witness, *the* beginning of the creation of God"); 9:18 ("*the* fire and *the* smoke and *the* brimstone…"); 12:10 ("*the* salvation and *the* power and *the* kingdom…"); 20:2 ("*the* dragon, *the* serpent of old, who is *the* devil and Satan") (emphasis added).

experience). The conditions/experiences they share are the present tribulation, coming kingdom, and ongoing perseverance they enjoy in Christ. These three elements, joined by the repeated use of the conjunction "καὶ," also might be connected via something very near, though not exactly equal to, the Granville Sharp rule[31] with the definite article that introduces the first in the series—i.e. "*the* tribulation"—also virtually introducing the next two. Though Richard Young and others say that "non-personal nouns disqualify" the rule in its purest sense,[32] in this case, John could have just as easily said "the tribulation and the Kingdom and the perseverance" but, perhaps for the sake of brevity or style chose not to.

Shared verbal type, tense, and mood can also serve as a textual justification for the presence of a triad. The invocation of the blessing in Revelation 1:3 reads, "blessed is he who *reads* and those who *hear* the words of the prophecy and *heed* the things which are written in it…". Here, "reads" (ἀναγινώσκων), "hear" (ἀκούοντες), and "heed" (τηροῦντες), involve a series of three present active participles that describe the actions that the speaker hopes the reader will take.[33] In 2:23 you have the repetition of the future tense when it says,

> 1) "I *will kill* her children with pestilence
> 2) and all the churches *will know* that I am He who searches the minds and hearts
> 3) and I *will give* to each one of you according to your deeds" (emphasis added)

In this case, the repetition of future tense verbs and the repetition of the conjunction "καὶ" serve as two indicators that justify this triad, awarding it a score of three.[34] Shared mood is present in Revelation 2:5 when Jesus encourages the church at Ephesus to "*remember* from where you have fallen, *repent* and *do* the deeds you did at first" (emphasis added for "μνημόνευε," "μετανόησον,"

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[31] Richard Young's statement of this rule is as follows, "when the copulative καὶ connects two nouns of the same case, [viz. nouns (either substantive or adjective, or participle) or personal description respecting office, dignity, affinity, or connection, and attributes, properties, or qualities, good or ill,] if the article ὁ, or any of its cases, precedes the first of the said nouns or participles, an dis not repeated before the second noun or participle, the latter always relates to the same person that is expressed or described by the first noun or participle: i.e. it denotes a farther description of the first named person." Richard Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek: A Linguistic and Exegetical Approach* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 1994), 62.

[32] Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek,* 62.

[33] See 4:8 for another example of three participles being used. See 11:6 for an example of three infinitives.

[34] See 3:5; 4:10; 6:1-2; 7:17; 8:7, 8-9; 11:7, 11; 14:19; 16:10-11; 18:3; 20:4; 21:4 for examples of triads indicated by shared verbal tense.

"ποίησον," respectively).[35] Here Jesus calls upon the church at Ephesus to endorse three corrective behaviors that he voices in the imperative mood. Similarly, in Revelation 19:7 you have an example involving the repetition of the subjunctive mood (hortatory subjunctives to be exact)—"(χαίρωμεν) and be glad (ἀγαλλιῶμεν) and give (δώσωμεν) the glory to Him…".

Another textual indicator of a triad is syntactical parallelism. These triads might come in fairly simple forms as in the case of three genitive phrases in 14:8—"…of the wine of the passion of her immorality…" (τοῦ οἴνου τοῦ θυμοῦ τῆς πορνείας αὐτῆς). Others are more complex as in the three threes of Revelation 2:2-3:

1) "I know
    (1a) your deeds
    (2a) *and* your toil
    (3a) *and* perseverance
2) *and* that
    (1b) you cannot tolerate evil men
    (2b) *and* you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not
    (3b) *and* you found them to be false
3) *and*
    (1c) you have perseverance
    (2c) *and* have endured for My name's sake
    (3c) *and* have not grown weary" (emphasis added)

Here, a three-fold structure includes a subsequent three-fold series of clauses, creating a triad of triads (each, by the way, introduced by another textual indicator—the conjunction "καὶ").[36]

Finally, there are those triads that are indicated with cardinal numbers (and the like) that ascend to three. For instance, there is a series of three "woes" spanning from 9:12-12:12 that are introduced in the following way:

1) "The *first woe* is past; behold, two woes are still coming after these things…" (9:12)
2) "The *second woe* is past; behold, the third woe is coming quickly…" (11:14)

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[35] For another triad involving the imperative mood/function see 18:6—"*Pay her back* even as she has paid, and *give* back to her double according to her deeds; in the cup which she has mixed, *mix* twice as much for her" (emphasis added). In this example "pay her back" (ἀπόδοτε) and "mix" (ἐκέρασεν) are aorists functioning as imperative commands while "give back" (ἀπέδωκεν) is a true imperative.

[36] For other examples of triads involving textual parallelism see 13:16

3) “*Woe* to the earth and the sea, because the devil…” (12:12) (emphasis added)

Though in this example only the first two elements possess a cardinal number, the inclusion of the repeated “woe” (“οὐαὶ”) in the third element successfully yields the triplet. Interestingly, Revelation 14:6, 8, and 9’s triad inverts this pattern.

1) “And I saw *another angel* flying in midheaven…” (14:6)
2) “And *another angel*, a *second one…”* (14:8)
3) “Then *another angel*, a *third one*, followed them…” (14:9) (emphasis added)

Here, the triad possesses at least two indicators: the repetition of “another angel” (ἄλλος ἄγγελος) and the cardinal numbers in the second two elements, awarding this example a score of three according to the scale introduced above.

Though most of the triads in Revelation possess at least one of the textual indicators illustrated above, there are some with no textual indicators beyond the presence of three associated phenomena in close proximity—i.e. those awarded with a low score of one. The opening verse of John’s apocalypse contains two examples of triads that have a score of one.

“the Revelation of Jesus Christ
1) which God
2) gave Him
3) to show to His bond-servants,

the things which must soon take place;
1) and He sent
2) and communicated it by His angel
3) to His bond-servant John”

A case can be made that in the first triad above John describes the source of the “Revelation” (“God”), the agent of the “Revelation” (“Him”), and the initial recipient of that “Revelation” (“His bondservant”/John). In the second example shown above, the reader observes something very similar, only this time the source is identified as “He” and the agent shifts from “Him” to “His angel.” Given that neither repetition (either of words, conjunctions, prepositions, verb type, tense, or mood), nor parallel structure, nor cardinal number is found in these examples, these examples receive a score of one according to the scale endorsed by this study. In the very next verse (1:2), John describes himself as the one,

"who testified
1) to the word of God
2) and to the testimony of Jesus Christ
3) even to all that he saw"

Though in English one might be tempted to cite the repetition of the preposition "to" as a textual indicator that would help justify the presence of this triad, this is inconsistent with what is found in the original language. That said, there are clearly three things that John claims to witness in this verse.[37]

A more interesting and theologically-charged example of a score one triad is found just a few verses later. There, three self-referential titles are used to describe "the Lord God"

1) "I am the Alpha and the Omega…"
2) "…who is and who was and who is to come"
3) "the Almighty"

In this example, God describes himself in three ways that are bereft of any of the textual indicators listed above but are three in number nonetheless.[38]

Now that these textual indicators have been identified and explained, this study can report that there are at least 149 triads in the Book of Revelation: 29 with a score of one (with no textual indicator), 74 with a score of two (those possessing one textual indicator) and 46 with a score of three (triads with at least two textual indicators). With this literary phenomenon now identified and justified, it is incumbent upon this study to investigate what purpose these triads serve in the greater scope of Revelation's message.

Triads and their Purpose

While analyzing and interpreting the meaning of this literary quirk might necessitate another study altogether, it is appropriate at this point to at least begin to consider what ends these triads serve. To be sure, there are several interpretive options available to the reader when she considers the myriad of triads in the text of the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ. Although the immediate context of each occurrence must be considered and every triad deserves to be scrutinized on a case-by-case basis, this study is more interested in calling for an investigation into why this prolific three-fold structure is so frequently utilized and what

[37] See also 1:9-10; 4:4; 7:9; 17:1-2, 10 score one triads involving three related things without the presence of a textual indicator.

[38] See 16:5, and 7 for similar examples. See also the oft-repeated construction of "Lord God, the Almighty" in 11:14; 15:3; 16:7; and 19:6.

relationship this literary pattern has with the book as a whole and its general message.

Some might be tempted to conclude that these triads serve as some sort of subliminal literary indication of the triune nature of God. Those who rush to this conclusion find some initial justification in specific triads in which the Trinity is implied or in full view. One example of this would be found in Revelation 1:4-5 in which all three members of the Godhead are identified.

> "John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from
> 1) Him who is and who was and who is to come (the Father), and from…
> 2) the seven Spirits (the Spirit) who are before His throne, and from…
> 3) Jesus Christ (the Son), the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood."[39]

Some have also suggested that the threefold "holy" of Revelation 4:8 (as in "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty…") is decidedly triune, with each "holy" describing one member of the Trinity.[40] Also, the three members of the Trinity exist in close proximity to one another in Revelation 22.[41] However, of the around 150 triads identified in this study, only 21 are theologically charged and of these only three identify the Trinity implicitly/explicitly. Given the variety of other ways in which these triads are operating and the many phenomena/personalities to which they refer, it would prove hermeneutically unsound to imply that these triads explicate much about the triune nature of the Godhead (at least as a general rule). That is, however, not to discredit that in at least three instances these triads do work to celebrate the completeness of the Trinity.

Another interpretive option for these triads is articulated by Leeland Ryken. He writes,

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[39] In this example "Him" (further described as "the one who was, and is and is to come" speaks of the Father (or first member of the Trinity) while the "seven Spirits" refer to the Holy Spirit (or third member of the Trinity) and Jesus Christ is an obvious reference to the second member of the Trinity.

[40] Norman B. Harrison, *The End* (Minneapolis: Harrison Service, 1948), 79. Ed Hindson, *The Book of Revelation: Unlocking the Future* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2002), 59. Also see this verse's connection to Isaiah 6:3. This is not the only interpretation the three "holies" in this verse, but this does represent a common interpretation of this particular verse.

[41] 22:13, "I am the Alpha and the Omega,…" (implying the Father); 22:16, "Jesus" (the Son); and 22:17, "Spirit" (the Holy Spirit).

> "There are principles underlying the threefold pattern of which we need to be aware. A single manifestation of something is self-contained; two manifestations might be coincidence; but three occurrences signify something special (as when Eli realized that God was speaking to Samuel only after God called the boy a third time [1 Sam 3:8]). A pair constitutes a contrast or balance, but three is a pattern. Once we are aware of this significance, we come to expect something when a pattern of three appears in a story, inasmuch as the pattern announces importance. A threefold pattern can also symbolize completeness."[42]

That the "importance" and even "completeness" might be the aim of the pervasive threefold structure witnessed in the Book of Revelation is, at first glance, a more fitting consideration related to these triads generally given the many important and all-encompassing phenomena implicated in these literary quirks. The totality of time, for instance, is identified with "who was, who is, and who is to come."[43] God's total creation is implied in 4:11 with "(1) for you created all things, (2) and because of Your will they existed, (3) and were created."[44] The complete devastation of the plagues unleashed upon the earth is highlighted with threes as in "(1) a third of the earth was burned up and (2) a third of the trees were burned up and (3) all the green grass was burned up."[45] The absolute absorption of the text of Revelation is encouraged from the outset with "blessed is the one (1) who reads and (2) who hears the words of the prophecy and (3) heeds the things which are written in it."[46] Examples like these and many others examine all dimensions of a personal quality or action by means of the threefold repetitive pattern.

However, more than merely suggesting the "importance"/"completeness" of a thing/person, Robert Alter explains that repetition is also capable of

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[42] Leeland Ryken, "Threefold Repetition" in *A Complete Handbook of Literary Forms in the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 198-99. Ryken goes on to say, "There are more than twenty examples of threefold repetition in the Bible. In the showdown on Mount Carmel, Elijah had the altar doused with water three times (1 Kings 18:33–34). Psalm 103 begins with a threefold ascription of praise to God (vv. 1–2) and has a pattern of three similes to describe God's greatness in the middle (vv. 11–13). Peter denied Jesus three times (Matt. 26:69–74). Threefold repetition is common in folk literature, and not surprisingly, the pattern shows up in Jesus's parables—three stewards to whom a master entrusts money (Matt. 25:14–15), three types of soil that are inhospitable to crops (Matt. 13:3–7) and three degrees of harvest in the good soil (v. 8), three passersby in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–33), and more." This is a conservative number on Ryken's part given the discussion currently underway in Revelation alone.

[43] See Rev 1:4, 8; 4:8; 17:8. See also 1:9 and 1:19 which talks about things past, present, and future.

[44] See also Rev 10:6.

[45] Rev 8:7. See also Rev 7:1, 3; 8:8-9, 12; 18:8.

[46] Rev 1:3.

highlighting a developing sequence of action to a natural or logical destination/conclusion.[47] Take Revelation 1:5b-6 as an example:

> "To Him…
> 1) Who loves us (a motivating factor) and
> 2) released from our sins by His blood (redemptive activity) and
> 3) and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father (result)…"

Here, the triad offers John an efficient way to survey the entire scope of salvation from inception to culmination—not only celebrating the significance and completion of salvation, but also demonstrating its order of operations. The same phenomenon is witnessed in 1:19 with the following:

> 1) "the things which you have seen and
> 2) the things which are, and
> 3) the things which will take place after these things."

Here, the totality of time is in view alongside its natural sequence (past, present, and future). The response Jesus desires from the church in Ephesus outlines a natural sequence of events also with

> 1) "remember from where you have fallen and
> 2) repent and
> 3) do the deeds you did at first."[48]

Added to these more specific examples are the sequence of plagues (that are three in number) and the sequence of woes in Revelation 9:12, 11:14, and 12:12.

Alter and Ryken's analysis of biblical repetition and the functions thereof is based primarily on Old Testament literature and as Revelation alludes to, quotes, and borrows prolifically from the Hebrew Bible,[49] one ought not be surprised to find echoes of old covenant forms and devices utilized in the Apocalypse. After all, Robert Wall argues that John's many allusions and

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[47] See discussion from Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 120.

[48] Rev 2:5. For other examples of sequential triads see 11:7; 14:9-10; 14:19.

[49] It is argued that Revelation contains more references to the Old Testament than any other book of the New Testament, Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2005), 9. See also Cook, *The Apocalyptic Literature*, 196, Donald Guthrie, *The Revelation of John's Apocalypse* (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans, 1987), 18, and G. K. Beale, *The Use of Daniel, in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature and in the Book of Revelation* (Eugene, OR; Wipf & Stock, 2010).

references to existing Hebrew narratives suggest that he composes his visions with the Old Testament fresh in mind.[50] Not only is much of John's rhetoric borrowed from the biblical prophets, but his visions can often be understood according to the types of people and events which the prophets themselves used to foreshadow God's work on the world's stage. If this is true, is it possible that John might be adopting repetition or patterns from the Hebrew narratives he references? If so, some understanding of how and why the Old Testament adopts and uses repetition might inform what John is doing (either consciously or unconsciously).
Alter suggests,

> "(Old Testament narratives would have been) read out from a scroll to some sort of assembled audience. . . rather than passed around to be read in our sense. The unrolling scroll, then, was in one respect like the unrolling spool of a film projector, for time and the sequence of events presented in it could not be altered, and the only convenient way of fixing a particular action or statement for special inspection was by repeating it."[51]

Given that Revelation, by its own admission, was intended to be heard as well as read[52] and that the nature of the vision given to John is incredibly complex, any mechanism that lends itself to content apprehension and memory (both in reception and transmission) would no doubt be exhausted, including three-fold patterns/repetition. What Alter identifies in his delineation of Old Testament narratives is what is found in Revelation: "an elaborately integrated system of repetitions, some dependent on the actual recurrence of individual phonemes, words, or short phrases, other linked instead of the actions, images, and ideas that are part of the world of the narrative."[53]

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[50] Robert W. Wall, *Understanding the Bible Commentary Series: Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1991), 17. See also P. J. Leithart, *Revelation 12-22*, T&T Clark International Theological Commentary (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 5. Here, Leithart states that John "writes with Scripture rather than about it. John paints an apocalypse, and the OT is his pallet."

[51] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 114.

[52] "blessed is he who reads and those who *hear* the words of the prophecy…" (Rev 1:3). See also the corporate nature of the content to the seven churches in Rev 2-3.

[53] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 119.

Conclusion

If Revelation serves as what Brian Tabb calls the "canonical capstone,"[54] then students of the Apocalypse ought to carefully consider its content *and* form in robust ways to arrive an appropriate understanding of that God has revealed. To this end and given what has been elucidated in this study, one can conclude at least three things: 1) the apostle utilizes a literary device that involves threefold repetition to describe a variety of phenomena in the apocalypse, 2) these triads are identifiable and justifiable grammatically/literarily, 3) these triads ought to be especially considered in any interpretation of Revelation. What has been yielded here ought to help future students more fully appreciate the compelling message and final climactic contribution of God's grand metanarrative—a contribution that while containing chaos, confusion, and cosmic catastrophe, is underpinned by a sophisticated and divinely-ordered literary structure that grounds what is revealed in a sophisticated, organized, and beautiful way.

[54] Brian J. Tabb, *All Things New: Revelation as Canonical Capstone* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2019), 24, "…Revelation brings the scriptural narrative concerning God, his people and his world to its grand conclusion."

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